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RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0650  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 0597  
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UNCLAS YEREVAN 000635

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [KIRF](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER AWARDS JEWISH COMMUNITY HEAD

REF: (A) YEREVAN 553, (B) YEREVAN 497 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) On July 21, Prime Minister Tigran Sargsian in a surprise move awarded Rimma Varzhapetian, the Chairwomen of the Armenian Jewish Community NGO, a memorial medal in recognition of her contribution to the strengthening and promotion of Armenian-Jewish relations. According to press reports, PM Sargsian thanked Varzhapetian for her active work in advancing Armenian-Jewish relations through constant cooperation with the GOAM. Local press quoted Varzhapetian as lauding this occasion to present Armenia to the world in the best light possible by talking about Armenian-Jewish relations. Broadcast media and online news agencies offered good coverage of the award ceremony, while the print media, particularly those papers which had recently carried anti-Semitic articles (Ref B), largely ignored the event. Opposition sources pointed to A/S Kramer's raising the issue of anti-Semitism with the GOAM during his visit (Ref A) as the impetus for the gesture, while contending that it was "nothing but a smokescreen to place before the international community."

¶2. (SBU) At the ceremony Varzhapetian also thanked the PM for a GOAM 2007 budget allocation of 21 million AMD (about USD 70,000) for the restoration of a medieval Jewish cemetery located in Yeghegis village in the southern Vayots Dzor region of Armenia. Varzhapetian claimed that the preservations and restoration works approved by then-PM Serzh Sargsian have already begun under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. (NOTE: Poloff visited the cemetery in June and found the place overgrown and saw no sign yet of restoration or preservation. END NOTE.)

¶3. (SBU) Varzhapetian, who called Emboffs after the ceremony, claimed that she had not known about the award when she was invited to the meeting with the PM. According to Varzhapetian, the PM told her at the ceremony about allocating space in the popular Victory Park in Yerevan for the Jewish community's initiative to plant an alley of 60 trees to honor Israel's 60th anniversary. Earlier, at the U.S. Independence Day reception on July 3, Varzhapetian had complained to the PM about the anti-Semitic press attacks and administrative problems about finding space for the alley (Ref B), following which the PM had instructed the Yerevan municipality to address this issue promptly.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: The absence of anti-Semitic articles in the press, together with this recent move and overall proactive position of PM Sargsian, shows that USG pressure on the GOAM -- especially DRL A/S Kramer's high-level interventions -- on this issue has had an affect. This award, in addition to recognizing Varzhapetian's activities in promoting Armenian-Jewish relations, probably also rewards her loyalty to the administration. Varzhapetian had been an outspoken supporter of Serzh Sargsian's presidential bid during the campaign (to the discomfort of some in the Jewish community, who felt she overstepped her appropriate role as a Jewish community

spokeswoman), but she had become very bitter about the anti-Semitic rhetoric that spewed from official and quasi-official media outlets. Notwithstanding these slightly sour notes in the back-story, it is a very positive step that the Prime Minister made such a public show of appreciation and support for Armenia's small Jewish minority. The gesture offers some antidote to the uncharacteristic eruption of anti-Semitism that emerged during the heat of an ugly election period.

PENNINGTON